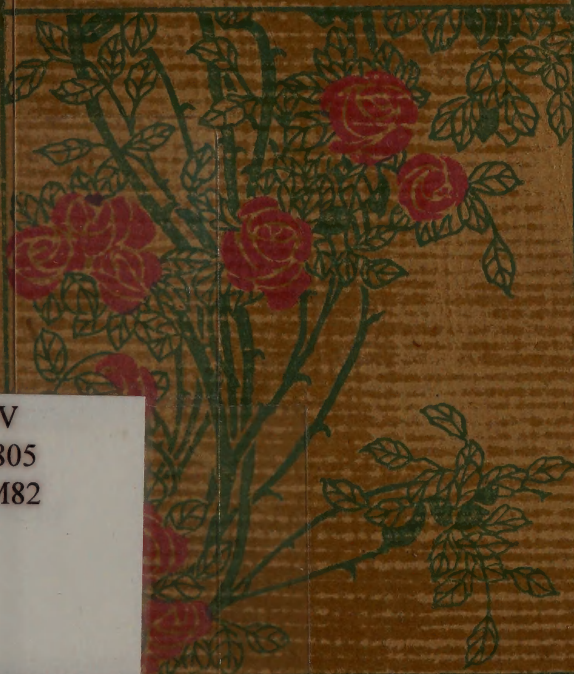


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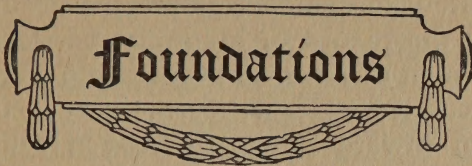


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Foundations

“If the foundations be destroyed,
What can the righteous do?”

Psalm xi. 3

Nothing! If the foundations be destroyed, the righteous are hopeless and helpless.

But are the foundations in danger?

This psalm is attributed to David. Opinions differ among those who hold this view, as to the circumstances under which it was written. Some refer it to the days of Saul’s persecution, and some to those sadder and darker days of Absalom’s rebellion.

And again, it is not easy defi-

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nately to decide whether the psalm is the record of a conflict between a man of faith, and those who were actuated by fear; or the record of an inward struggle between faith and fear.

Let us say at once that none of these things matters. Whether David wrote the psalm or not is of little moment. The peculiar and local circumstances under which it was written are of no importance in our study. Whether the advice of fear and the affirmation of faith, were those of two men in controversy, or those of two voices within the soul, is practically of no consequence.

That which is of interest and value is that the psalm reveals a conflict between faith and fear in an hour of difficulty and of danger, which conflict resulted in the victory of faith.

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In order that this may be clearly before the mind, let us take time to examine the whole psalm.

Such examination will reveal the fact that the words selected as the basis of our meditation are those of fear, and not those of faith. They constitute part of the advice to the man of faith, either of some fearful friend, or of the voice of fear within his own soul.

The psalm opens with a great affirmation of confidence,

“In Jehovah put I my trust.”

In immediate connection the question is asked,

“How say ye to my soul?”

and there follows the repetition of the thing which had been spoken, the advice given, against which faith was making its protest.

Let us then look at that advice,

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separated from the language of protesting faith;

“Flee as a bird to your mountain;
For, lo, the wicked bend their bow,
They make ready their arrow upon
the string,
That they may shoot in darkness at
the upright in heart.
If the foundations be destroyed,
What can the righteous do?”

In these words we have advice given to this man, either by friends of his, or by the fears of his own heart, the tremblings of his own spirit.

Against that advice faith protested as it enquired,

“How say ye to my soul?”

and the ground of the protest is revealed in the affirmations of the rest of the psalm.

“In Jehovah put I my trust:

* * * *

Jehovah is in His holy temple,
Jehovah, His throne is in heaven;

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His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the
children of men.

Jehovah trieth the righteous:

But the wicked and him that loveth
violence His soul hateth.

Upon the wicked He shall rain
snares;

Fire and brimstone and burning wind
shall be the portion of their cup.

For Jehovah is righteous; He loveth
righteousness:

The upright shall behold His face."

Comprehensively then it may be said that we have in this psalm, the advice of fear and the answer of faith, in the midst of circumstances of grave and imminent peril, resulting from malice and treachery. The righteous man is seen in danger from threatened violence on the part of the wicked; and fear, prudent fear, politic fear, utters its advice as it charges him, Flee man, flee as a bird to your mountain; flee away from the place of peril. Your standing is crumb-

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ling beneath your feet because the foundations are destroyed.

To such advice faith replies,

“Jehovah is in His holy temple,
Jehovah, His throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the
children of men”;

and therefore flight is unnecessary. Fear says, Flee to the mountain. Faith replies, I cannot flee, I dare not flee, I need not flee.

Let us now examine more particularly this advice of fear and this answer of faith.

THE ADVICE OF FEAR

The final word of the advice is that of the text.

“If the foundations be destroyed,
What can the righteous do?”

The whole argument of fear is based upon the supposition that the foundations are destroyed, and in the statement immediately pre-

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ceding this enquiry, the reasons for believing that they are destroyed are given.

The first is that the wicked are in opposition. The picture drawn is a very graphic one. It is that of determined and imminent violence. The bow is already bent, "the wicked bend their bow"; the arrow is fixed upon the string, ready to take its flight, "they make ready their arrow upon the string"; and the target of the arrow is the righteous man, against whom the wicked have set themselves in array.

Moreover this opposition of the wicked as seen in the picture, is not fair and above board; it is not opposition in the open;

"That they may shoot in darkness at
the upright in heart."

There, hiding in ambush, in the

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darkness, stealthily, is the enemy, with the bow bent, and the arrow ready to take its swift flight for the heart of the righteous man; and because of that, the advice is given, Flee, flee as a bird to your mountain.

That view of the nature of the peril constitutes the conviction that the foundations are destroyed. Fear declares; This is not an even conflict; murder is not warfare; your case is hopeless because your enemy will not come out into the light. This attitude and threatened activity is the outcome of the mastery of passion. Law no longer reigns. If the fight were on a fair field and without favour, you might stay and contend, but those in opposition are adopting the methods of subtlety and deceit. What can the righteous do under such circumstances? If the foun-

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dations be destroyed the righteous can do nothing.

The inference of the question is perfectly fair and absolutely correct; if the foundations be destroyed, the righteous will be destroyed, if he remain where he is. Therefore the appeal of fear is logical; it is better that the righteous man should fly. Let him fly as a bird, let him fly and seek his own personal safety; let him give up his attempt to stand for righteousness and to establish it. Let him away to the mountains and secure, at least his own safety. If the foundations are gone, building is impossible. Let the man in danger see to himself.

Before listening to the answer of faith, let us enquire wherein the mistake of the advice of fear consists. It is in the fact that the outlook of the one giving the advice, is

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limited; and therefore the advice is false. Fear never sees the whole of the facts. Fear is always near-sighted. The supposition of this advice is the result of a mistaken conception of what foundations really are. Supposing for the moment that this was actually the advice of a friend of David, given to him in some hour of imminent danger, then it is evident that he imagined that the fairness of enemies constituted a foundation, and that if foes had ceased to be fair, the foundations were failing. The advice was born of the conception that circumstances are foundations. That is entirely false. Circumstances are only scaffolding. This advice was given by one who looked at a day, as though in it the whole of a life could be seen; at that which is immediate, as though by observation of it, there

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could be perfect understanding of all the forces bearing upon that life. As he looked, the near things were those of enmity and hostility. The supreme vision was that of a subtle foe who had lost a sense of fairness, and who lurked in the darkness with the bow bent, and the arrow upon it, ready to speed on its flight for the destruction of the righteous man. To one with that outlook upon life, the foundations were indeed destroyed.

Yet though all that was wrong, I am constrained to say that I should not have known it was wrong, had it not been for the answer of the man of faith. It was a subtle word, this word of fear spoken to David, either by a friend, or by the trembling of his own nature. It was a plausible word, having in it all the elements of logic, and policy, and wisdom.

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Who shall gainsay it? No man can gainsay that advice unless he have the vision of the man who answered. Blot out for me what remains of this brief psalm; deny the affirmations which follow, and I have no course open other than that of flight as a bird to the mountains. Apart from these affirmations I shall abandon all hope and all endeavour; for the forces massed against right are mighty, and the most terrible fact in the fight for righteousness is that the forces against it do not come into the open. They lurk in dark and hidden places, and shoot privily, until it does seem as though the very foundations were gone.

THE ANSWER OF FAITH

The answer of faith is first that of a general affirmation.

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“In Jehovah put I my trust,” followed by a careful declaration of the reasons for that trust.

The first of these reasons is thus stated,

“Jehovah is in His holy temple,
Jehovah, His throne is in heaven.”

Other reasons follow, at which we shall presently look, and perhaps they seem to touch us more nearly. They seem to help us a little more immediately, but as this was the first in the thought of the psalmist, it is for evermore the first in the actual facts of life.

I am not at all sure in my own mind, let me at once admit, as to the exact and final sense in which two great words are being much used in present day discussions. I refer to the words “immanence” and “transcendence”; the immanence of God, and the transcendence of God. While I have some

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idea of the simple meaning of the two words, I am afraid that idea does not help me to understand the use of the terms to which I have referred. What some men mean I confess I do not know, and I may parenthetically remark that I am not perfectly sure that they know what they mean. But let that pass, and taking the simple suggestions of the words, I affirm that the first fact creating faith in the heart of this man was not that of the immanence of God, but that of His transcendence.

Not that God is close at hand, intimately associated with all the facts and forces in the midst of which we live,—without that fact we cannot live, and to a consideration of it we come presently,—but that God is higher than the earth, away from it, even while close to it. He is in His temple. His throne is in

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heaven, and as another psalm declares,

“His Kingdom ruleth over all.”

That is the first fact upon which faith fastens; that He is in His temple, that His throne has never yet been shaken or rendered vacant, in spite of all attempts made against it; which attempts have inevitably resulted in failure.

“Jehovah is in His holy temple”; above the conflict, in the place of serene and impartial judgment. If I lose that conviction, — I speak for myself, — if I lose that sense of God, nothing will make me master of fear. If He be none other than near; if He be merely one among many forces; or if He be merely the sum total of these forces which are contradictory and in conflict; then I am not sure of what the issue may be, of which element will at last be victorious.

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This then is the first vision; Jehovah is in His temple, His throne is in the heaven. He is above the strife, and beyond it. It cannot ultimately triumph over Him, or shake His throne. He abides on the throne of His government in the quiet serenity of His eternity. That is the first fact upon which faith fastens.

But that is not the final fact. He is not enthroned apart, in ignorance, or in indifference;

“His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men.”

The figurative language of the term is almost startling, as so often is the case in these Old Testament Scriptures where the picture presented by a word is so graphic that we are almost afraid to translate literally, and to follow the thought suggested. The statement of faith here is that God is not merely on the

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throne; He is watching, He is observing; and the figure suggested by the two words, is that of One bending over, and minutely and earnestly contemplating all that is passing before His eyes. He sees the man in the dark with the bow bent, and the arrow ready to fly. He sees the man who is the intended target of that arrow; and I repeat, the words of the psalmist are startling, as they reveal the intensity of the observation of Jehovah.

Just as in the prophecy of Malachi, we have that wonderful word spoken of the attitude of God toward His people as He listened to them, "The Lord hearkened and heard"; so here the attitude is revealed by the declaration, "His eyes behold, His eyelids try." In the description of the listening of God, "The Lord hearkened and

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heard," we have not the same word twice repeated; two ideas are suggested. The Hebrew word translated "hearkened" literally means "pricked His ears." The figure is that of a horse, pricking the ears, listening to every tone of its master's voice. The Hebrew word translated "heard" means to bend over, in order not to miss a single syllable.

So here, the declaration "His eyes behold," conveys the idea of the most intense gaze in order to perfect perception of the fact; while the second declaration "His eyelids try," suggests that fluttering of the eyelids in rapid closing and opening over the eyes, when the purpose is to test, to investigate, to discriminate, to be perfectly sure.

All this is, to use the term of the theologians, anthropomorphic, the speaking of God as one would

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speaking of a man, which is a perfectly correct thing to do; indeed, it is the only way in which it is possible for man to understand God, Who is Spirit; and the ultimate vindication of the method is that of the Incarnation.

The thought of the psalmist is that Jehovah, Who is in His temple, Who is on the throne, is not indifferent. He is watching, and that with the minutest care; so that nothing escapes His observation. All that fear has seen, God has also seen; only fear has not seen God.

But the outlook of the psalmist takes in more than these first facts. Not only is it true that God is in His temple, and that He is enthroned; not only is it true that He is perfectly conscious of all that is going on, watching, considering, observing; it is also true that He is active.

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The first fact of His activity is revealed in the declaration, "He trieth the righteous," by which the man of faith declares that the very circumstances of difficulty in which he finds himself are not only known to Jehovah, but are under His control, they are part of God's method.

"How say ye to my soul,
Flee as a bird to your mountain?"

I cannot flee, first because God is in His temple, and is enthroned; secondly because God is watching; but thirdly and supremely because He is trying me by these very circumstances. I dare not flee, I dare not attempt to escape the pressure by which He is trying me. He is active in the midst of the very circumstances that have constrained fear to make its appeal for flight, and that consciousness makes flight impossible. It is that conviction

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which compels the man of faith to sing,

“O Cross, that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red,
Life that shall endless be.”

And again, God is not only active in the midst of the circumstances that try the righteous, He is active in judgment against the wicked. He will rain snares and fire and brimstone upon the evil.

Thus the man of faith sees Jehovah not merely enthroned, not merely watching, not impassive; but holding the reins, already at work, and ready to interfere at the right moment; actually at work, making use of the strain and stress of the hour, making use of all the forces massed against the man of faith, making use of the very enmity of foes, making use even of

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the apparent break up of order. Himself, in His being and in His activity, the Ultimate Foundation, when all other foundations seem to be gone; He is making use of all these things for the perfecting of the character of the man who seems to be in peril, and for the bringing of that man into true relationship with Himself. Therefore to all hostility there is the limit of His government. The arrow may be upon the string, the bow may be bent to its utmost, the enemy may now purpose to allow it to wing its way to the heart of the righteous man; but it can never strike unless God permit; and upon the evil who attempt by subtlety to destroy the righteous, He will rain snares and brimstone and a burning wind.

The Lord is in His temple, in the place of calm and unruffled

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serenity. From that height He is watching, so that He knows the way I take, its sorrows, its difficulties, its perils; so that He sees the foes and the forces that are massed against me; and He is not only thus enthroned and observant, He is active. By these very things He is trying me, and perfecting that which concerneth me, and at last He will overcome all my foes.

Such was the outlook of faith, and for one having such an outlook the answer was reasonable, logical,

“How say ye to my soul,
Flee as a bird to your mountain?”

To a man who has this vision of God, as high and lifted up, enthroned in the eternal quiet of the temple; yet watching, so that no detail escapes His knowledge; and perpetually active in the midst of all the forces in which that man

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lives, flight is impossible, flight is unnecessary, flight would be sinful. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? But the foundations are not destroyed, therefore,

“How say ye to my soul,
Flee as a bird to your mountain?”

Mark well the two logics of the psalm; the logic of human wisdom and prudence, which lacks the larger vision of God; and the logic of human wisdom and prudence which is the result of the vision of God. The former has but one word of advice to men in places and hours of peril; Flee, flee! In face of danger, grave, imminent, and subtle; in the day when the forces in opposition seem to be more and mightier than we are able to contend with; then we are constrained to declare that the foundations are gone, and it were wiser

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to abandon the struggle and take refuge in flight. All this is pre-eminently logical, if our vision be only that of circumstances.

But there are men and women who have climbed far higher than that. As to circumstances they are buffeted, storm-tossed, and in peril; and with best intention, friends observing only these things of difficulty, urge them to fly, and the prudent fears of their own soul make the same appeal. Yet because of the larger vision, their answer to all the advice of fear is that of the psalmist;

“How say ye to my soul, Flee?”

I cannot flee, I dare not flee, I need not flee; for Jehovah is in His temple, He is watching, He is active.

We all have our days of darkness, when the outlook seems almost hopeless, when the founda-

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tions seem as though they were destroyed, in personal life, in home life, in national life; and in such days the temptation that urges flight is sure to come.

Perhaps some of our best friends; best that is, in the sense of their true human love and affection; but who lack the vision of eternity, the sense of the spiritual, will say to us, Give up the struggle, Flee as a bird to your mountain; all this high ideal of yours is fanatical! If the foundations be destroyed, what shall the righteous do? You have no fair chance. If indeed, you were called upon to fight on a fair field, and without favour, we would advise you to continue the conflict, but this is not so. Your enemies are hidden, they are stealthy, they are without principle. Give up the struggle. Why do you still strive for a national ideal of righteous-

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ness? Why not give it up? That is the language of fear, and it is the language of unbelief. The hour in which we live is in many senses one of grave and peculiar peril, and reverently, I say, God knows it would be easier to run away, while we look at the things seen. We feel sometimes as though it were of the essence of rest to abandon all toil. We have tried and fought and striven for the coming of the Kingdom of God in London, and there are hours in which we are inclined to say nothing has been done. Is it all worth while? The foundations are destroyed.

But they are not! The attitudes of the foe do not constitute foundations. Circumstances are not foundations. Let us seek the right view-point as we start again, and if we have that view-point, then the psalmist's affirmation will be ours;

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“The Lord is in His holy temple,
The Lord, His throne is in heaven.
His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the
children of men.”

That central fact of His activity is one upon which we need to fasten our faith in these days. We may change the wording but not the fact.

“He trieth the righteous.”

That is a statement needing no change.

If we will express the thought of His judgment in the terms of the hour, we may declare that He will end the iniquity, however strong it be, however subtle its method, however devilish its insidiousness, however it lurk in hidden places. He will drag it into the light, and smite it by the breath of His fiery wrath to ultimate death. That is our confidence.

If that be our view-point then we shall set our faces to the future

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full of hope and full of courage. We cannot flee, we cannot seek personal safety in flight, because it is unnecessary. Our safety does not consist in escape to the mountains, but in our abiding in our calling with God. That three-fold vision of Jehovah will rob temptations of their power, will make flight impossible, because it will give us to see that flight would be sinful,

“For right is right, since God is God;
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin.”

Therefore, exactly where we are, though it be in the place of peril, with enemies lurking in the darkness, we will abide.

“In Jehovah put I my trust.
How say ye to my soul,
Flee as a bird to your mountain?”

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